



FEATURE / DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Fleeing war in DR Congo to find 'war' in Brazil's favelas

Hundreds of Congolese refugees seeking asylum in Rio de Janeiro face the violent reality of life in the city's favelas.

by **Matt Sandy**

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Luta Espoir-Babou holds a photo of his baby son, Vencedor (Winner), who died in Brazil due to lack of medicines [Fabio Teixeira/Al Jazeera]

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - When war came to his town in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), footballer Luta Espoir-Babou says he saw two babies barbecued and eaten.

The 23-year-old says he was once told if he did not vote for President Joseph Kabila, he would be killed.

He fled to Angola in 2008.

Seven years later, he stowed himself away in the hold of a cargo ship for 45 days to reach Brazil.

Now he lives in the Cinco Bocas favela, or shanty town, in Rio de Janeiro, which is fought over by two gangs.

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Shootouts are common and he is more afraid for his life here in Brazil than he was back in Africa.

"I was scared in Congo, but only during times of war," he says. "Here the war is always happening, and it is happening below my window."

The ongoing turmoil of war, disease and malnutrition has claimed the lives of 5.4 million people in DRC, more than any other conflict since World War Two, a study by the International Rescue Committee found.

Kabila has held power despite his mandate expiring in November 2016, leading to prolonged instability.

The volatility had led to the displacement of five million people, with 675,000 of those fleeing for refuge in other countries, according to the UNHCR.

Even more than 6,437km (4,000 miles) away in Rio de Janeiro, the effect is being felt.

More Congolese - more than 650 - are awaiting asylum in the city than any other nationality, according to the Catholic relief charity Caritas.

More than 940 have already been granted refugee status, Caritas reported.



Congolese refugees in Brazil cry during the wake of their friend Congoles Godar, who died in a car accident [Fabio Teixeira/Al Jazeera]

As well as the challenge - familiar to millions of refugees across the world - of starting a new life in a strange culture with little money, the Congolese in Rio de Janeiro also face the violent reality of life in the city's gang-controlled favelas, where shootouts are common.

Despite often being highly educated, they struggle to get anything but menial jobs, unaided by an underlying racism against Africans.

Single mothers, often fleeing sexual abuse, face bringing up children - and dealing with their traumas - in a foreign country with little social safety net.

'It was like being dead'

In Angola, Espoir-Babou feared he could be sent back to the DRC, so he saved for two years selling whiskey to be able to pay to stowaway on a container ship to Brazil with his pregnant 20-year-old wife Joel Nzinga Mayala.

They remained in the dark below deck for 45 days, eating only biscuits and water they had brought.

"It was like being dead," he says.

With no clue as to whether it was night or day, they only emerged from the depths of the vessel when they heard the ship's horn as they arrived in Rio.

They had no money at all, and only the clothes they were wearing.

He says the boss of a friend asked him: "Are you a Christian?" and gave him a \$20-a-day job washing cars.

Now he works at a gas station. Menial work is common among educated refugees from the DRC here, with lawyers working as cleaners or on building sites.

Espoir-Babou fears for his life at his home in Cinco Bocas. His son Vencedor (or Winner), who was born soon after they arrived in Brazil, died when he was eight months old because of a lack of medicine at a health clinic.

"I am afraid, but what can I do?" he asks.

"In the Congo, only the foreign forces have guns. The locals only have knives and they are not nearly as dangerous."

According to Aline Thuller, coordinator of the Refugee Assistance Program at Caritas, "90 percent of the Congolese live in favelas far from the centre".

"Sometimes they hear more gunfire than they ever did back home," she says.

"I know of several who had to leave their homes and everything in them behind because of the violence, such as one case when a traficante (drug dealer) wanted to date one woman's daughter."

Brazil is not a major destination for refugees, but since 2000 there has been a steady stream from the DRC, she adds.

Nationally, in 2017, there were 33,865 applications for asylum, with half of these coming from Venezuelans, according to data from Brazil's National Committee for Refugees (CONARE).

But that surge in demand has led to a backlog, with only 1,179 requests being considered last year, of which 40 percent were approved, including 108 from the DRC, the second highest after Syria, according to CONARE.

'They are black, foreigners and refugees'

Racism is also a problem, Thuller says, with children being called monkeys at school.

"It is very painful for them to discover this prejudice," she adds.

"They are black, they are foreigners and they are refugees. So it is much worse for them."

Chadrac Nkusu, who arrived in 2013 and also lives in Cinco Bocas, says it is "very difficult" for Africans living in Brazil.

The 21-year-old recalls becoming ill after being employed illegally for \$14 a day painting a shopping mall, when everyone on his team was an African; how rent here in the favela is higher for outsiders; and how security guards outside hotels in the rich South Zone eyeball black men.



Chadrac Nkusu lights candles in his home. He has lived without electricity since the energy company cut the supply when he was unemployed [Fabio Teixeira/Al Jazeera]

For Thuller, those in the worst situation are single women with children, who she says are typically running from awful situations of rape or sexual abuse.

"As they have children they struggle to get work," she says.

"Childcare does not exist for Brazilians, let alone them, and they don't speak Portuguese. So they help each other, they'll take another in and have five children in a one-bedroom house."

Speaking at a United Nations conference in 2016, Mireille Muluila, a Congolese refugee in Rio de Janeiro, described how if they do manage to escape the DRC, many women such as her will arrive in a third country pregnant with children conceived by rape.

In Brazil, this creates difficulties as Brazil's government requires women to prove maternity.

Daianne Rafael Vieira, an anthropologist from the Federal University of Pernambuco, studied how Congolese in Rio de Janeiro adapted to their new circumstances.

"The fact is that, over time, the Congolese began to form their own networks and communities," she wrote in a postgraduate thesis at the Federal University of Pernambuco in 2015.

"During this period, the church and the older Congolese in the region together played a key role, as they offered centres of attention and reception to the newly arrived refugees or even a first enlightening contact. Furthermore, the Congolese are linked by friendship and kinship."

Back in Cinco Bocas, Luta sits in his one-room favela apartment and sighs. "I am afraid, but what can you do?" he says.

"If the situation changed in the Congo, then I would definitely want to go back there."

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA NEWS
